



## Qatar

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and the requirements of protecting the public system and public behavior; however, the Government continues to prohibit proselytization by non-Muslims and places some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, as interpreted by the conservative Wahhabi order of the Sunni branch.

The status of respect for religious freedom improved somewhat during the reporting period. On June 9, the Constitution, which explicitly provides for freedom of worship, including the adoption of laws guaranteeing the freedom of association and public assembly, came into effect. On June 29-30, the Third Conference for Religious Dialogue on Islam, Christianity, and Judaism took place. Non-Muslims may not proselytize, and the Government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of non-Islamic religious books and materials; however, in practice, individuals and religious institutions are not prevented from importing Bibles and other religious items for personal or congregational use. There are no Shi'a employed in senior national security positions.

There are generally amicable relations among persons of differing religious beliefs.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 4,254 square miles and its population is an estimated 744,000, of whom approximately 200,000 are believed to be citizens. Of the citizen population, Shi'a Muslims account for approximately 10 percent and Sunni Muslims comprise the remaining 90 percent. The majority of the estimated 544,000 noncitizens are individuals from South and South East Asian and Arab countries working on temporary employment contracts along with their accompanying family members. They are of the following faiths: Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is. Most foreign workers and their families live near the major employment centers of Doha, Al Khor, Messaeed, and Dukhan.

The Christian community is a diverse mix of Indians, Filipinos, Europeans, Arabs, and Americans. It includes Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Anglican, and other Protestant denominations. The Hindu community is almost exclusively Indian, while Buddhists include South and East Asians. Most Baha'is come from Iran. Religion is not indicated on national identity cards and passports, nor is it a criterion for citizenship in Qatar according to the Nationality Law. However, Qatari citizens are either Sunni or Shi'a Muslims with the exception of a Baha'i and Syrian Christian and their respective families who were granted citizenship. Shi'a both citizens and foreigners, may attend a small number of Shi'a mosques.

No foreign missionary groups operate openly in the country.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of worship in accordance with the law and the requirements of protecting society and public behavior; however, the Government continues to prohibit proselytization by non-Muslims and places some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, as interpreted by the conservative Wahhabi order of the Sunni branch. Shi'a practice most aspects of their faith freely and they may organize traditional Shi'a ceremonies and perform rites such as self-flagellation. Qatari law on nationality does not impose any restrictions on religious identity.

The Government and ruling family are linked inextricably to Islam. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The Emir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj journeys of pilgrims who cannot afford to travel to Mecca.

The Government has given legal status to Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Coptic, and many Asian Christian denominations. It maintains an official approved register of approved religious congregations.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Islamic New Year, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Converting to another religion from Islam is considered apostasy and is technically a capital offense; however, since 1971 there has been no record of an execution or other punishments for such a crime.

The Government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of non-Islamic religious literature. Individuals and religious institutions are allowed to import Bibles and other religious items for personal or congregational use. In addition, religious materials for use at Christmas and Easter are available readily in local shops.

Religious services were held without prior authorization from the Government; however, congregations may not publicly advertise them in advance or use visible religious symbols such as outdoor crosses. Christian services are regularly held and open to the public. Some services, particularly those on Easter and Christmas, can draw more than 1,300 worshippers.

Some Christian groups were having difficulties finding a place to worship. Religious services were usually held in private houses, schools or hotels; however, since the car bombing in March, school officials have placed more restrictions on some of these groups due to security issues.

The Government did not permit Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, or members of other religions to operate as freely as Christian congregations and they were not allowed to rent space to hold their services publicly. However, there was no official effort to harass or hamper adherents of these faiths in the private practice of their religion.

No foreign missionary groups operate openly in the country. In June 2004, a new criminal code was enacted that established new rules for proselytizing. Individuals caught proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation for any religion other than Islam, are sentenced to a term in prison no longer than 10 years. If proselytizing is done on behalf of an individual, for any religion other than Islam, the sentence is imprisonment for a term no longer than 5 years. According to this new law, individuals who possess written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity are imprisoned for no longer than 2 years.

Discrimination in the areas of employment, education, housing, and health services did occur, but nationality was usually a more important determinant than religion.

Islamic instruction is compulsory in public schools. While there were no restrictions on non-Muslims providing private religious instruction for children, most foreign children attended secular private schools. Muslim children were allowed to go to secular and co-educational private schools.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim litigants may request the Shari'a courts to assume jurisdiction in commercial or civil cases. In 2005, a new panel was established in the courts for Shi'as. The panel decided cases in the following areas: marriage, divorce, inheritance and related disputes. Convicted Muslims may earn points for good behavior and have their sentences reduced by a few months by memorizing the Qur'an.

The official interpretation of Shari'a imposes significant restrictions on Muslim women, including in matters of inheritance and child custody. Muslim wives have the right to inherit from their husbands; however, they inherit only one-half as much as male relatives. Non-Muslim wives inherit nothing, unless a special exception is arranged. Shari'a is also applied in cases of divorce. Both parents retain permanent rights of visitation; however, local authorities do not allow a noncitizen parent to take his or her child out of the country without permission of the citizen parent. Women may attend court proceedings. They are generally represented by a male relative; however, they may represent themselves. According to Shari'a, the testimony of two women equals that of one man, but the courts routinely interpret this on a case-by-case basis. A non-Muslim woman is not required to convert to Islam upon marriage to a Muslim; however, many make a personal decision to do so. A noncitizen woman is not required to become a citizen upon marriage to a citizen. Children born to a Muslim father are considered to be Muslim.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Abuses by Terrorist Organizations*

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

In May, representatives of Christian churches in the country signed an agreement with the Government of Qatar for a 50-year lease on a large piece of property in Doha on which they intend to erect six churches at their own expense. The churches will pay nominal lease fees of a few hundred dollars a year, renewable after 10 years. The property will include an Anglican church that may also be used by other Protestant denominations, a church to serve 34 Indian Christian congregations, a church for the country's small but influential Coptic community, and a site for two Orthodox churches, one Greek and one Eastern Rite.

The Emir and top government officials strongly support the swift construction and establishment of churches on the ground. The Government assigned a coordinator to speed up the process and facilitate all required building procedures, although some restrictions have been imposed on the use of certain religious symbols on building. Each church was granted permission to apply for visas for visiting clerics to preside over and assist in church services. Authorities encourage church officials to submit visa requests for visiting clerics far in advance in order to facilitate the visits. Non-Muslim religious figures were seen in public, although Qatari society was not used to seeing them in their religious garb.

The Third Conference for Religious Dialogue took place on June 29-30 in Doha. For the first time in the country, representatives from the main monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—were invited. Invitations were extended to the Anglican Church, Coptic Church, Middle East Churches Council, Orthodox Church, the Vatican, and Jewish rabbis, among others. A delegation from Israel was invited, and one composed of two former chief rabbis of Israel was named. However, the delegation declined to attend when conference officials (to placate conservative Muslim opinion) said they would not be included in panel discussions. Rabbis from the U.S. did attend and were full participants.

#### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

Relations between persons of differing religious beliefs generally are amicable and tolerant. The press and media generally treat non-Muslim religions in a respectful manner. The film "Kingdom of Heaven" about the Crusades was widely advertised and well-received in the country. On a few occasions, privately owned newspapers have carried articles or cartoons with anti-Semitic content; however, there were no acts of physical violence against or harassment of Jews.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. Embassy officials met with Government officials at all levels to address religious freedom issues. The Embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the Government, and coordinated initiatives with other embassies to increase their impact.

The Ambassador and other Embassy officials also met with representatives from a number of religious communities in the country to discuss religious freedom issues, including protection of the interests of minority congregations and allegations of discrimination on religious grounds. These issues were brought to the attention of appropriate officials in the Government and on the National Human Rights Committee.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51608.htm)